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CASTRATING AND DOCKING LAMBS

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Joint Contribution from the Bureau of Animal Industry
John R. Mohler, Chief, and the Bureau of Markets
George Livingston, Chief

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THE LARGEST PART of the returns from farm flocks is derived from the sale of lambs.

In order that this source of income may be as large as possible, it is necessary to have the lambs in the best possible marketable condition.

Ram lambs and undocked lambs are discriminated against on the market because they are less well developed and lack a uniform and attractive appearance.

It is impossible to obtain as large gains or as good condition on lambs that have not been castrated.

This bulletin discusses how these operations may be done safely and effectively on the farm.

CASTRATING AND DOCKING LAMBS.

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ESSENTIALS IN THE PRODUCTION OF A GOOD LAMB CARCASS.

THE SHEEP INDUSTRY depends for a large part of its returns upon the lambs produced from the flock. The meat side of the industry is of great importance and bears a direct relation to the profits from the flock. Three essentials are necessary to produce a desirable lamb carcass: (1) good breeding, (2) proper feeding, and (3) castration and docking of the lamb. The most desirable and thus the most profitable lamb carcass can not be produced from lambs which have not been docked and castrated.

Agencies interested in the sheep business are making an effort to educate the American public to eat more lamb and mutton. If this effort is to be a marked success, the lambs must be properly bred and fed, and the carcass must be of a desirable character. While beef, pork, and lamb sell at somewhat similar prices, an increased consumption of lamb is dependent upon a supply that is at least as good in quality as the other meats.

The farmer does not market his bull calves as bulls, nor his boar pigs as boars. Why, therefore, should he market his male lambs as ram lambs rather than as wethers? The correction of this neglect by docking and castrating the lambs is vital, and upon a more general observance of the practice in the farm flocks hinge the real profits and more general success. If the industry is to be made to yield satisfactory returns, the docking of lambs and the castration of males not intended to be kept for breeding purposes should be attended to without fail at the proper time.

LARGE PROPORTION OF FARM LAMBS NOT DOCKED OR CASTRATED.

It is conservatively estimated that 80 per cent of the native lambs—those marketed from farm flocks—which reach the markets come undocked and uncastrated, and that the percentage of ram lambs among the offerings during the last year has been as large as ever before. The remark, "What a trashy lot of natives," is often heard in the sheep houses of the leading markets. This is because lambs, uncastrated, undocked, partly fat and partly lean, and showing no uniformity in weight, quality, or condition, come to market from the farm States weighing all the way from 40 to 100 pounds each.

On the other hand, the custom of docking all lambs and castrating the males is almost universal in the range flocks, and to this practice, in large measure, may be attributed the fact that lambs produced on our western ranges outsell native or farm-raised lambs at the market on the average from $1 to $1.50 per hundred pounds. It is true, of course, that uniformity in breeding is a factor in favor of the western lambs. It is certain, however, that had the flockmaster of the West not found castration and docking of lambs highly profitable, these operations would not be so commonly practiced in that great lamb-producing section.

ADVANTAGES OF CASTRATION AND DOCKING.

DISCRIMINATION IN MARKETS.

The severe discrimination shown by buyers against heavy ram lambs and the harmful influence on consumptive demand accruing from the slaughter of such great quantities of stock that can not make a satisfactory food product seems not to be fully realized. Certainly more vigorous efforts to improve the situation on the part of those directly interested in the welfare of the sheep industry should be made. Big, coarse ram lambs produce inferior meat, as do the thousands of thin, untrimmed, cull, native lambs that have to be slaughtered because the feeder will not buy them. It is not surprising that the consumer balks at purchasing such meat and forms a prejudice against it. With our markets flooded with low-grade lambs, the average consumer, an unskilled judge of meat on the block, has little chance of escaping frequent disappointment in purchasing that kind of meat and instinctively turns to other meats in which he feels he has more chance of getting a palatable food product.

In the fall of 1919 the Chicago market received large supplies of native lambs. During that period (and the condition reported is but a repetition of conditions prevailing in the summer, fall, and winter months of preceding years) the discrimination against ram lambs,

especially those carrying weight, was very marked. Packer buyers have demanded the throwing out of heavy ram lambs from loads, buying the bulk of such stock at from $4 to $5 per hundredweight below the price paid for the top end of the load.

Farmers and shippers sometimes state that they receive as much for their bucky lambs as they get for their ewe or wether lambs.

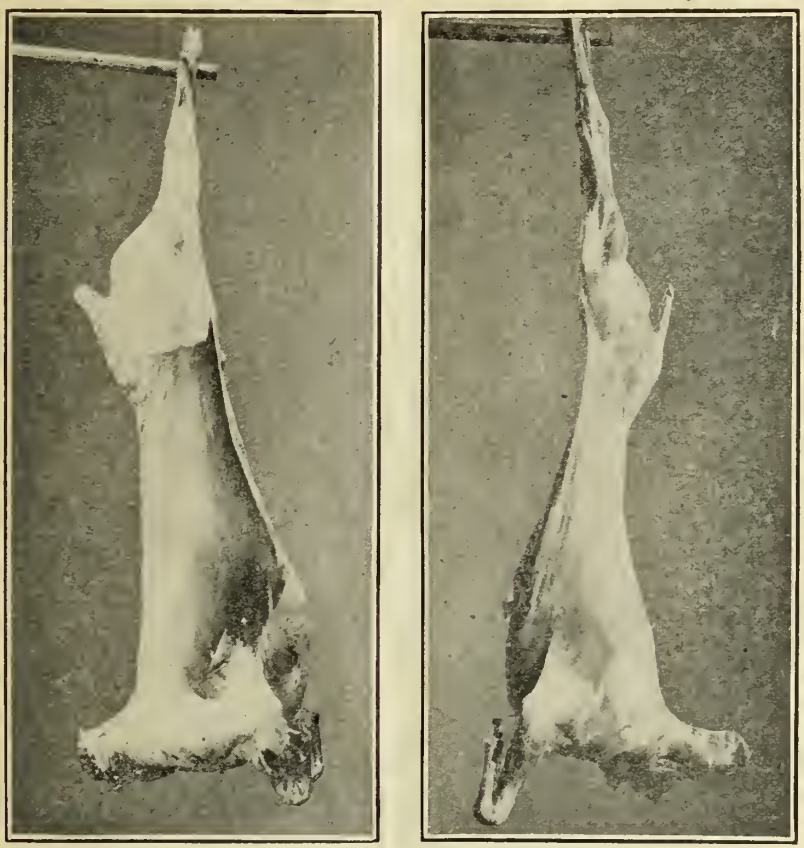

FIG. 1.—Which carcass do you prefer?

Wether carcass, smooth in the shoulder, short in neck, deep and thick over loin and in the leg, well finished and uniformly covered.

Bucky carcass, coarse in neck and shoulders, light in loin and leg, lacks covering and proper finish.

That is not really the case. Often at the central market, the salesmen, when busy, do not sort out the bucky lambs from a shipment and sell them separately, but their presence in the load is taken into account and a dockage is the result. Thus the ewe and wether lambs have to bring up the average of the sale, and the farmer or shipper is penalized because he has failed to dock and castrate. Thousands of heavy ram lambs have sold at from $10 to $12 on a market ab-

sorbing the general run of fat handy-weight native lambs at from $14 to $15, while the occasional straight load of well-conditioned ewe and wether native lambs has commanded premiums of from 25 to 75 cents per hundredweight over the highest sales of fat and handy but bucky lambs recorded on the same day's market. (See fig. 1.)

Buyers assert that the finished load of native ewe and wether lambs, comparatively uniform in weight and quality, is intrinsically

FIG. 2.—Cutting off end of scrotum.

worth the premium such stock commands over loads of bucky stuff or heavy ram lambs. This fact is well substantiated by the avidity with which they search out the first-named kind and by their frequent neglect of the bucky lots, even at the price discounts noted.

DOCKED AND CASTRATED LAMBS SELL ALSO AS FEEDERS.

In addition to the added value for slaughter of ewe and wether lambs over the bucky kinds, the producer who docks and castrates his lambs has a product that if not in good killing condition invites

competition from feeder buyers, consequently increasing their sale value. This competition is entirely lacking in the case of ram lambs. Another important reason for the castration of male lambs is found in the fact that better weight gains are assured than when such lambs are permitted to mature to the age of 5 or 6 months as rams. Every experienced lamb feeder must recognize the fact that the more quiet his lambs can be kept the bigger the gains they will make. The presence of even a few ram lambs causes restlessness in an entire

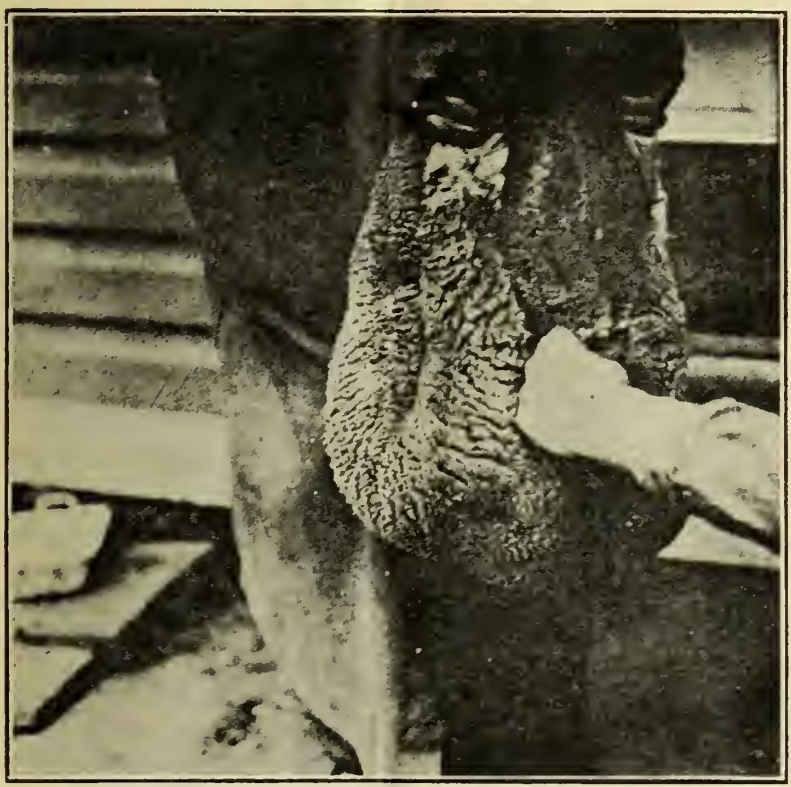

FIG. 3.—Testicles exposed.

flock, since the rams not only keep their own flesh down but also that of the other animals of the flock.

A LOAD THAT SOLD AT A PREMIUM.

In September, 1918, a well-known packer in Chicago received a load of ewe and wether native lambs direct from Louisville, where the stock was purchased at $18.50 per hundredweight. At that time $17 was considered practically the top of the market for "good" lambs, as the trade usually considers them, while "seconds" were

selling at $13 and "thirds" down to $10. This load of lambs, although costing on foot more per hundredweight than any native lambs were bringing in Chicago at that time, and far above the general top at Louisville, was pronounced by the buyer as being as well worth the money as any lambs his house had slaughtered for some time. He attributed this to the fact that the lambs were docked and castrated, and were uniform and well finished.

The discrimination made by packer buyers against bucky, undocked, uncastrated lambs is only justice to the lamb producers who

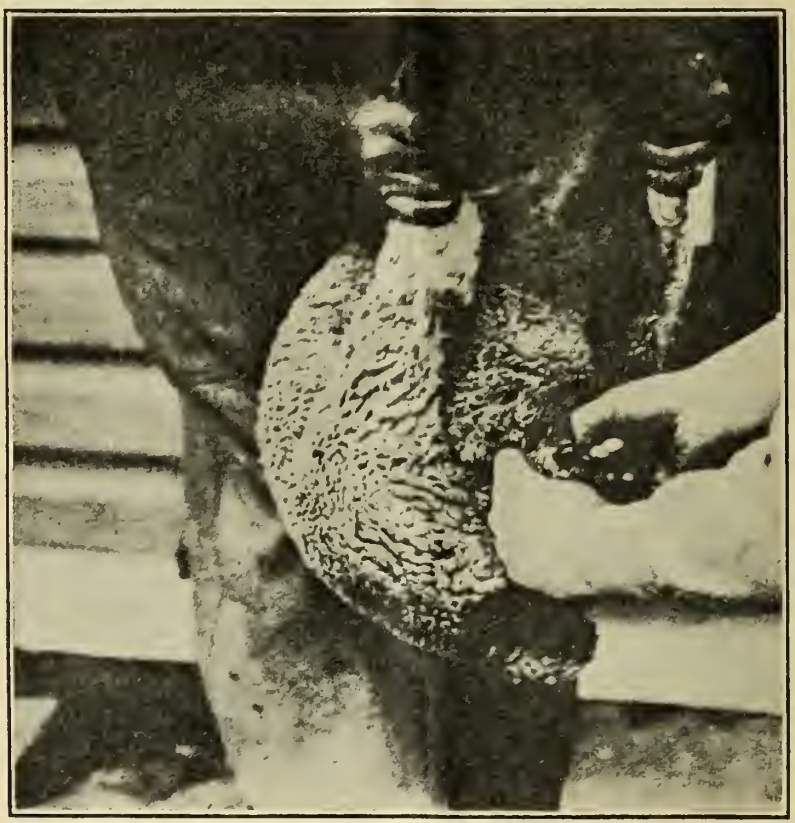

FIG. 4.—Pulling out testicles with the adhering cords.

practice docking and castration. By thus placing a premium on the right kind of lambs, in proper market condition, a service is being rendered to the sheep industry as a whole. It is to be hoped that country buyers, as well as packer buyers, and all branches of the trade will continue to emphasize this fact by notifying their shippers in making returns to them on their consignments. Such a step would be educational and help to correct the failure to dock and castrate native lambs.

CASTRATION.

BENEFITS OF CASTRATION.

Very substantial benefits arise from the early castration of lambs. First, they make more weight at an earlier age—castrated lambs are more quiet, and so make better gains. Second, they are more easily managed—both sexes may run together at all times without the danger that the females will be bred. Third, early castration results in

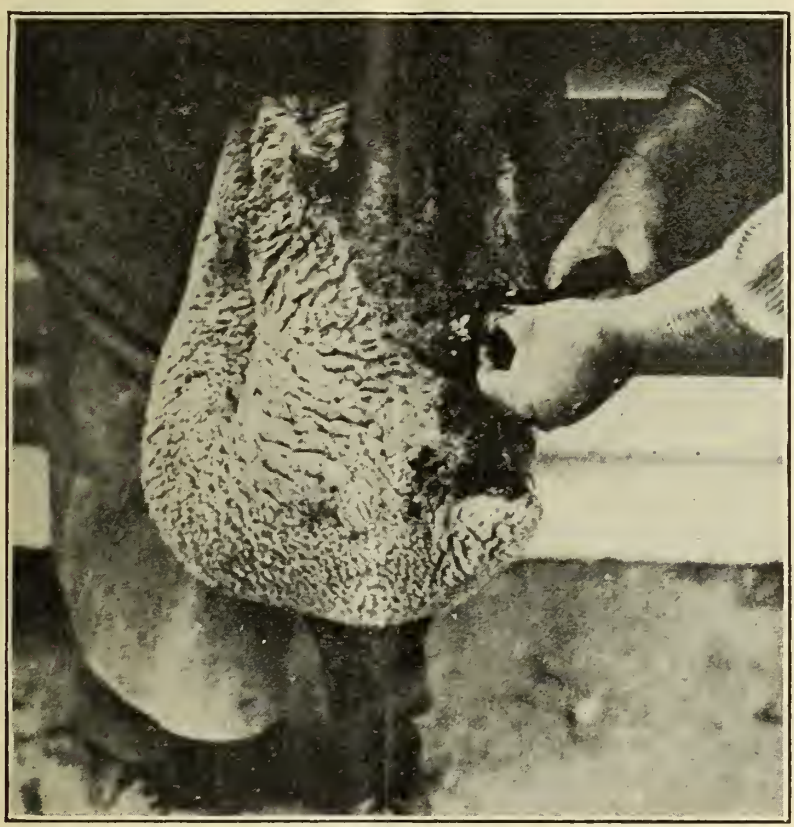

FIG. 5.—Applying an antiseptic.

the production of a better carcass, as it prevents undue development of the head, neck, and the front quarters. As stated before, buyers severely discount uncastrated lambs to an extent ranging from $2 to $5 per hundred pounds in comparison with castrated and docked lambs of the same age.

METHOD OF OPERATION.

Castration is not dangerous if a little care is taken, and can be performed by any careful person who will follow directions. Lambs

should be castrated when they are from 7 to 14 days old. Choose a bright day; do not castrate lambs on a damp, chilly, or rainy day. Select from the flock all lambs that are to be castrated and fence them off so that they can be caught without undue excitement. Never worry or chase lambs before performing the operation. Provide a clean stall or pen for them to go back to after the operation is performed. The operator's hands must be clean and the knife disinfected.

FIG. 6.—Docking with knife. Note position of knife and operator's thumbs.

The lamb should be held against the body, as shown in the illustration. Cut off one-third of the lower end of the scrotum, or bag, so as to permit good drainage. Then expose the testicles, as shown in figure 3, and with the left hand force them out, holding them in this position by a firm grip between the thumb and fingers, which are held close to the abdomen of the lamb. Next, grasp the testicles firmly between the thumb and fingers of the right hand, as in figure 4, and draw them out with the adhering cords. The work should be done quickly but not roughly, and the testicles and adhering cords

should be drawn out with a steady pull. The wound should then be washed with a good antiseptic, such as a weak carbolic solution, or a creolin or lysol preparation, as shown in figure 5.

When lambs are older than 3 weeks before the operation is performed the cords should not be pulled out but scraped off with a knife back of the testicle. The scraping is done to prevent excessive bleeding.

Lambs should be kept quiet after they have been castrated. It is best to perform the operation in the morning, so that they can be watched during the day and attention given any that become too weak from loss of blood.

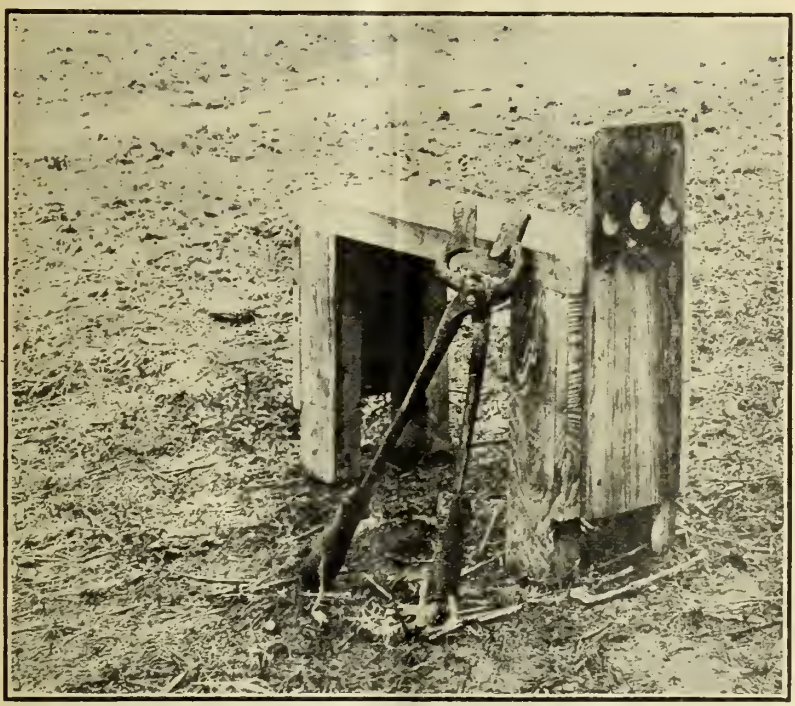

FIG. 7.—Equipment for docking with heated irons.

DOCKING.

BENEFITS OF DOCKING.

Lambs can be docked at the same time that they are castrated. When care is used both operations can be performed at the same time and labor saved, as the lambs will have to be caught only once. It should be a uniform practice to dock when the lambs are from 7 to 14 days old.

The lamb's tail renders no substantial benefit to the animal. Its presence is injurious because of the filth that accumulates around and beneath it. Moreover, lambs are more attractive and look neater and deeper in the leg and twist if the tail is docked. When the tails are left on females they are apt to fail to breed.

The two preferable ways of removing a lamb's tail are by using a sharp knife or the docking irons. One man holds the lamb while the other performs the operation.

FIG. 8.—Lamb in position to dock.

When docking with the knife the operator, by feeling on the inside of the tail, first locates the joint to be cut, which is about 1½ inches from the body. He should then push the skin on the tail back toward the body of the lamb so as to leave some surplus skin to grow over the stub. The cut should be made quickly with a sharp knife. If any lamb should bleed too much a piece of cord may be tied very tightly on the stub of the tail close to the body, to stop the bleeding,

but the cord must be removed in a few hours or the tail will slough off.

When hot pincers or docking irons are used, no danger need be feared from loss of blood. Old sheep can be docked successfully in this way. The pincers should be heated to a cherry-red heat, not hotter, and the tail seared off at from 1 to 1½ inches from the body. (See fig. 9.) The wound will be seared over and no blood lost. When

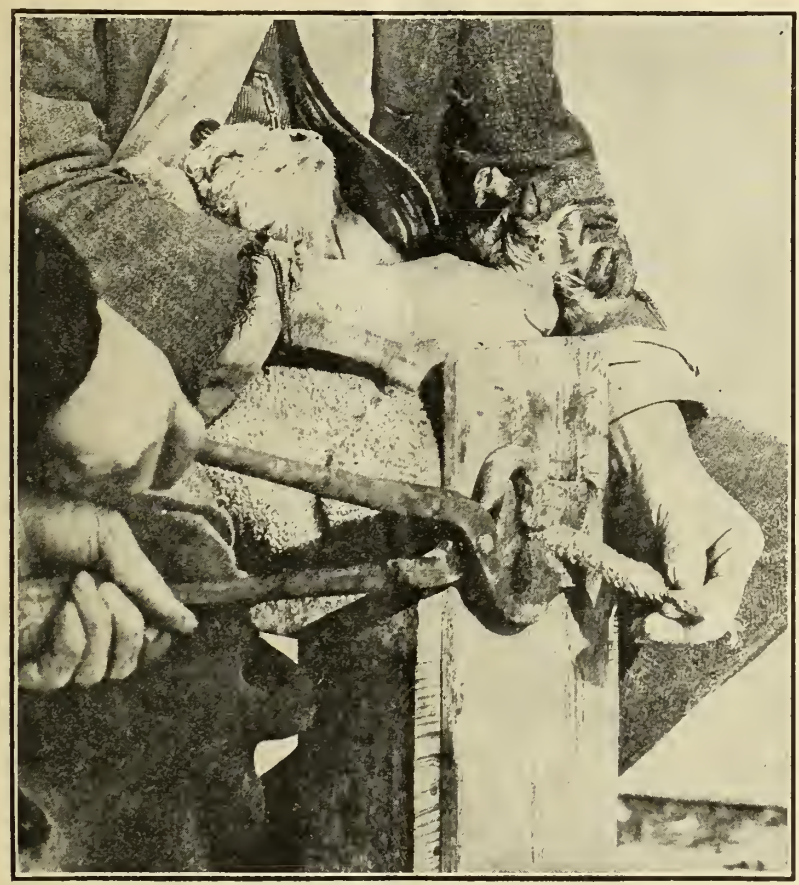

FIG. 9.—Docking with heated irons.

the irons are used at proper temperature the wound will heal satisfactorily, but probably not so quickly as when the knife is used. The wound is also sterilized and needs no further attention. When the lambs are in a pen near at hand, with one man to catch them and another to hold them, from 9 to 12 lambs can be docked without heating the irons again. The lambs should be watched for a few days to see that they are recovering from the operations satisfactorily.

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